Walsingham and the English Imagination, by Gary Waller. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011. Pp. xii+237; 4 color, 12 b/w figs. ISBN: 9781409405092. £55. (Available as ebook in ePUB and PDF formats.)

ON THE DAY that I sit down to write this review, an article in my daily newspaper, *The Independent*, on the reduction in violence in the UK names the district of Broadland in north Norfolk as the "most peaceful" area in the country. I wish I could say that Walsingham is the most peaceful place in England, but it seems Walsingham is in the adjacent district; it is certainly a special place. In his final chapter, Gary Waller describes Walsingham as "a place that lends itself to a sense of the uncanny and the mysterious" and invokes the title of one of Julia Kristeva's books: *This Incredible Need to Believe* (187, 189). The use of the writings of Kristeva and other feminist theologians and philosophers establishes the feminist methodology used in this discussion of the Marian shrine at Walsingham. Waller acknowledges that "Walsingham has been a recurring fascination of mine since my student days" (ix); nostalgia and yearning are palpable, but there is a genuine sincerity in Waller's approach to difficult questions about the meaning, past and present, of the shrine, and academic rigor balances any personal belief.

Much in this book is fascinating, and it is a pity the cover isn't more imaginative: a black-and-white photograph of the Anglican shrine, all very symmetrical and ordered, sits squarely on a dark red background. The "English Imagination" of the title seems regimented and dull indeed. How much better to have used an image of the remaining west window of the priory which metonymically evokes nostalgia for what was lost at the dissolution and is also, Waller suggests, "a lonely but defiant vulvic symbol" (194). The term "English imagination" is taken from Peter Ackroyd's study *Albion: the Origins of the English Imagination*, though whereas for Ackroyd this imagination "has no history" (6), Waller's approach is essentially historical: he is constructing the history of the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, not as a physical place but as itself a construction of the imagination, and he traces this history from the first records of the shrine in the Middle Ages through its "erasure" in the sixteenth century to its "disinterment" in the nineteenth century. It is a history told through works of the imagination—works in which fiction and fact often imitate one another. In David Lodge's novel *Paradise Lost*, Lodge raises "the issue of whether in a postmodern, desacralized world, pilgrimage to a place like Walsingham or Compostela can be a meaningful metaphor, representing more than nostalgia and escape" (180). The question of Walsingham's potential meaningfulness

hovers over much of this account of its history (the "it" being the Walsingham of the English imagination, located in a particular geographical place but not identical with that location) and comes to rest in the final chapter when Waller returns to the present, and to the village itself, and his own personal preoccupation with Walsingham. Waller acknowledges the contradictions inherent in feminist readings of the Virgin, herself the object of the patriarchal Catholic church's theology, but also suggests the possibility of her (even as located in conservative Walsingham, where there is Anglican opposition to women priests) as the site of alternatives to "that dominant tradition"; this may mean taking inspiration from far away from Norfolk: "She is, as an Argentinian theologian puts it, writing on the Madonna of transvestites, the Virgin of many petticoats" (193).

This may give some idea of the scope of this book. Chapter 2, splendidly titled "Gynotheology" (to refer in this case to "a high degree of concern with the gynecological . . . by both late medieval Mariology and its Reformation opponents," 48) might seem to be the chapter most relevant to readers of this review, but I found it the least satisfying. Waller concentrates here on the "women-centred experiences" offered by the Marian shrine at Walsingham and the women pilgrims who, he suggests, were "likely" to have constituted the majority of pilgrims to Walsingham (56). Unfortunately, there is a great dependence on what was "likely" or "probably" the experience of women pilgrims. He claims that East Anglia "was an area with a distinctive focus not just on the Virgin, but on women's religious experience generally" (54) and discusses Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe largely through readings by feminist scholars. I would have liked to see Waller's own reading and to see him connect these writings directly with Walsingham. He also refers to Hildegard of Bingen (whom he claims was writing in the tenth century, 55), but the line he quotes from her *Symphonia*, taken out of context and given a radical interpretation by Judith Peraino, does not do justice to Hildegard's complex theology or her transcendent apprehension of the feminine divine. I am not convinced of the relevance of erotic imagery in the spiritual writings of medieval women to his overall argument for the imaginative construction of the Lady of Walsingham.

The strength of this book lies in Waller's interpretations of texts that constructed the Shrine of Walsingham in the English imagination, starting with the Pynson ballad and Erasmus's semi-fictional account. He treats all his material with "his own mild version of Erasmian irony" (a term he uses to describe the writing of the nineteenth-century local historian John Gough Nichols, 158). Waller's expertise is in early modern literature, and his reading of Ralegh's version of the Walsingham ballad is particularly valuable, showing how the Queen

of Heaven, as our Lady of Walsingham once was, has been "transformed" into an "unpredictable earthly goddess"; she is also the Queen of England, and Ralegh adopts the customs of the court in endowing her with the epithets of the Virgin Mary (109). Waller demonstrates how Ralegh brilliantly adapts the ballad "to his own personal and political agendas," yet the poem also resonates with nostalgia for the loss of the old world (110).

Post-dissolution literature is polarized by the religious convictions, Protestant or (Anglo-) Catholic, of the writers and the interpretations of the figure of the Virgin from the "'traditional' image" most Catholics would defend to the subversive alternatives Waller suggests were present, if only in "traces" in medieval Walsingham (192). Waller traces this powerful, sexualized Mary, enshrined at Walsingham, from her medieval past to her imaginative present, finally acknowledging that "The shrine garden powerfully exemplifies the tension between the 'Petrine' and 'Marian' traditions in Christianity which Beattie sees as dualistic, hierarchical, and de-legitimating women's experiences" (199). This may explain why Waller himself, "with some regret, abandoned the mysteries and contradictions of Anglo-Catholicism" (ix).

(It is a pity that there are frequent errors of punctuation and syntax, detracting from the quality of the book.)

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